

Designing Vocabulary Games: How to Use Words from a Text

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For most people, nothing is more tedious than learning vocabulary lists. For most people, nothing is less efficient than learning vocabulary lists. How does one memorize vocabulary, then?

Words that you have to use in some practical situation are remembered best. If you work as an au pair in an English-speaking country, you will soon know and remember ladle, garbage, mothballs. If you stay in autumn with a family who have a garden, wheelbarrows and rakes will soon become as familiar as pen and pencil.

Meanwhile, if words cannot be manipulated in their natural context, the next best thing might be to manipulate them in games.

Of course, one can take lists of words and play with them. But one can also use the new words that have come up in written or oral texts in class and use them in games/exercises so that passive comprehension has a chance of getting transformed into active acquisition and use.

When a text is particularly rich in new terms-a long newspaper article or a short story-what can a teacher do?

- Make an *alphabetical* list of all the words to be memorized.
- Observe their meaning, their form (verbs, nouns, adjectives, etc.), their physical aspect (length, first and last letters, double letters, diphthongs, etc.).
- Pick and choose from the following games the ones that are best adapted to the vocabulary items you want to work on.

Visual Arrangements

These games play on the physical aspect of the words. They also use definitions a lot, and this is useful training for dictionary work.

Word Chains: (in lines, waves, or even circles). These are easy to do. The end of one word is the beginning of the next one. Ex.:

LadlEageRioTonsiL

Replace each letter by a hyphen, and the exercise will look like this :

L - - -	E - - -	R - -	T - - - -
1	2	3	4

Give a definition for each word, or a gapped sentence. This will apply to all the exercises in this section.

Word Squares: (three- or four-letter words that are the same down and across). These are difficult to design. The words must be appropriate. Ex.:

	1	2	3
a.	B	E	E
b.	E	E	L
c.	E	L	M

Word Ladders: (words that are formed by changing one letter-three-, four-, or five-letter words). Ex.:

M	A	N
M	A	P
C	A	P
C	O	P
T	O	P
T	I	P

The changes can be less automatic. For each change, give instructions: *change one letter*, *add two letters at the end*, *subtract one letter*, etc. Or you can select words that are identical except that one has one letter more at the beginning or at the end. Ex.:

CAP	THOUGH	TAR	EAR
CAPE	THOUGHT	STAR	FEAR

Word Pyramids: (same game but with a growing number of letters). Ex. :

A
A N
A N D
S A N D
S T A N D
S T R A N D

	G	L
	R	A
M O I S T	S	
E	H O S T R I P	
F	A	
	P	
	E	

SUGAR	<i>GUEST</i>
MOURN	<i>USUAL</i>
BORED	<i>RAPID</i>
TENSE	<i>NAIAD</i>
SIEVE	<i>EAGER</i>
MAYOR	<i>YOUTH</i>

SPRing	mOAn
SPRout	lOAd
SPRead	fOAl
SPRawl	rOAm
thIEF	
grIEF	
brIEF	
chIEF	

---- RE ----- meagREcognition
-- TAL --- meTALent

-- THOUGH - - - - alTHOUGHtful

Crossword Puzzles: The most difficult and time-consuming to prepare, but they can be kept fairly small and simple. One form that I find uninteresting is a grid filled with letters, in which some words have to be found in it, because this game appeals solely to recognition and not to definition/memorization.

Other Games

Odd Word Out: You need three or four words that can be put in the same category of meaning. Add one that, in one way or another, does not belong. Students have to find which one is the distractor and explain why. Ex.:

money currency penny change

The odd word is penny (which is concrete and a countable noun), as opposed to the other three words which are abstract (and uncountable nouns).

Bingo: Prepare bingo cards-cards with squares, each square being filled with a word or a definition. On small cards, a little smaller than the squares, write a word or a definition, according to what you have written on the larger cards.

If there is a lot of vocabulary to review, you can make cards with different words, one for each team (three to five students) and then proceed, with the class as a whole, as in a normal game of bingo, calling out the words or definitions. The team who have the word/definition ask for it and put it on their card. If there are fewer words, you can make the same cards for each team and then only the quickest team gets the small card to cover the appropriate square.

You can also give a bingo card and a pack of small cards to pairs or teams, and they do the game together. The first to finish is the winner. This is quieter and less frustrating for the students who know the right answer but are not quick enough.

Bingo games are nice for synonyms and antonyms and for homophones.

If you choose to have teams working on their own, you can use gapped sentences instead of definitions.

Categories: Give a list of words in alphabetical order. Students, in teams, have to put them in given categories or categories of their own choosing. Set a time limit. Then compare the teams' results and discuss discrepancies and mistakes. Award points for each complete and correct list of words.

Ambassadors: Prepare a list of words that can be mimed. Put the easy ones at the beginning of the list. Abstract notions need not be excluded.

Divide the class into teams of about five people.

At the beginning of the game, each team sends an “ambassador” to the teacher, who gives the first word. The ambassadors go back to their team and mime the word. They must not speak. When someone finds the right word, s/he becomes the ambassador and goes to the teacher for the next word, etc. The first team to find all the words is the winner.

The same exercise can be done with drawings or definitions.

Board Game: Prepare a board of the Snakes and Ladders type, with numbers and the definition of a word on each square. Students in groups of four or five go round the board, throwing a die. When they land on a square, they must give the word that corresponds to the definition. If they cannot, they go back three spaces. The first person to get to the end is the winner.

Riddles: Give teams four or five concrete words. They must make definitions in the form of riddles. The other teams have to guess the answer.

Hidden Quotation: This game takes quite a long time to design but is worth it if you are going to use it several times.

Select a short quotation. Put the words you want to work on in gapped sentences. Give numbers to the letters of the words you will need to find the quotation. Not all the letters will be of use, and you can give some of them as a help. Give a number to each letter of the quotation that corresponds to a letter of the words. Write the numbers under the hyphens representing the letters of the quotation. When a word is found, students write it in its place in the gapped sentence and then write the letters they have obtained in the right place in the quotation. Then the quotation emerges. It may help find the words that had not been found.